

Survival Strategy for the 10 Mile Hike

Several members of our class have participated in the Plebe marchback each of the past 6 summers, ever since this tradition, designed to forge a bond between the new Plebes and the Long Gray Line, began. Here are a few suggestions on how to survive the marchback.

In previous years the marchback went from Lake Frederick to West Point and was about 15 miles in length. Generally the marchback commenced about 1:00am and finished at 9:00am as the CBT (Cadet Basic Training) Regiment, followed by the “Old Grads” executed an “eyes right” as they passed the reviewing party standing in front of the Superintendent’s quarters. The reviewing party generally included the Supe, the Com, the Dean and the Command Sergeant Major.

The major challenge you’ll face is the loss of a night’s sleep. Our “rockbound highland home”, where the marchback will cover some 10 miles from Camp Buckner to the Plain, is exactly that – a series of rocky paths, some uphill, some downhill and virtually all challenging on a dark summer night. So, you’ll need to be rested – get a good night’s sleep Saturday night – you might even want to take a nap for a few hours late Sunday afternoon before you report to Herbert Hall for a bus ride to Camp Buckner.

The Plebe talent show will probably start about 7:00pm and last for about 2 hours. Following the talent show, those who will do only the 2 mile hike and spouses will return by bus to Herbert Hall. The rest of us will remain at Camp Buckner for a safety briefing, joining our cadet units, and possibly catching a few winks on the ground before our units step off.

You’ll probably step off in near pitch blackness and will hike along roads and trails with steep rises and drops, rough surfaces with loose stones and sand, and projecting bedrock. There will be several rest breaks along the route – some are simply drops to the ground in tactical formation, others are locations with portalets, water and power drinks. The paths are marked with glow markers on the ground and many of the cadet cadre will wear glow markers on their packs. It is important to keep yourself hydrated throughout the night – frequent sips of water are important.

When your cadet unit reaches the base of the Ski Slope, the CBT Regiment and the “old grads” will part company. From that point on, the marchback will, in effect, be reorganized into a routine military parade for the final 2 miles through Washington Gate and along Washington Road. From that point on, virtually everyone at West Point will be lining the route to welcome the Class of 2010.

For those of you who have kept relatively fit by participating in regular exercise programs, getting ready for the marchback shouldn’t be difficult. If you haven’t exercised regularly or if you’ve experienced medical problems that might limit your ability to tackle such a rigorous hike, it is suggested that you opt for the final 2 miles

only. The 2 mile hike is an uplifting and heartwarming event. Many, many older graduates continue to come back for that memorable event.

For those participating in the long march, it is suggested you start a brisk walking program at least 2 months before the marchback. Unless you're already involved in a regular aerobic exercise program such as hiking, biking, running, swimming, or training on aerobic exercise equipment, we recommend you begin walking workouts that simulate the conditions you'll encounter at West Point. You want to feel confident in your ability to walk such a long distance in near total darkness under challenging environmental and terrain conditions. You want to be able to go up and down steep inclines, so try to include some hilly terrain on your walking course. If you live in flat country, consider using stairwells or sports stadium bleachers. All you need is one hill or set of stairs – just repeat it a lot!

Start out with a walking distance you can handle easily, even if it's just 1-2 miles for at least 3 sessions per week. Increase one or two of your sessions by a mile each week until you feel you can handle an 8-10 mile walk with relative ease. On the days you aren't walking, do some other beneficial exercise such as swimming or light training on exercise equipment.

Plan a day of rest after doing your longest walk of the week. Try not to get over-fatigued, which could lead to illness or injury. If you find yourself overtired and irritable, you are probably training too hard. Intersperse more rest days or slow your pace during some of your workouts. Your first training week might look something like this:

Sunday – 1 Mile Walk
Monday – Rest Day
Tuesday – One Hour Walk
Wednesday – Rest Day
Thursday – 3 Mile Walk
Friday - Rest Day
Saturday – Fun Exercise – swim, bike, canoe, etc.
Sunday – 1 Mile longer than last Sunday

Try to get some exposure to walking in the dark. Get up before daylight and walk around the neighborhood (wear reflective gear). Find a rocky, hilly trail that you can do repeated treks over – this will help you to be ready for the rough surfaces you'll face in the dark during the first 8 miles of the marchback.

By Marchback Weekend, you should feel confident that you can walk 3-4 hours for a distance of 10 miles over varied terrain and surfaces with just a couple of breaks along the way. You may not reach that level by then, but the more you can handle coming in to the marchback, the better you'll feel when you reach the Supe's quarters, and the less stiffness you'll experience in the days following the marchback.

Suggested personal equipment and supplies



- (1) Light hiking boots: Your single most important item. Don't wear running shoes, walking shoes or tennis shoes. There are a lot of good quality lightweight boots on the market. You can pay anywhere from \$50 to \$400. Boots vary in height. We recommend you wear a boot that come up to the middle or over the ankle to reduce chances of spraining your ankle. Unless you plan to do lots more serious hiking, we don't recommend buying expensive boots. Just make sure the boot fits well with a heavyweight sock on. Buy your boots early on so you can break them in well. Spray your boots with waterproofing the day of the marchback.



- (2) Hiking Pole(s): Some marchback participant have used a hiking pole or a pair of hiking poles. They add extra stability when sliding over loose rock or sandy surfaces. There are inexpensive collapsible models or you can get a wooden version with a rubber cap on the bottom end. If you choose to use hiking poles you'll have to be very conscious of where you place the tips – you don't want to stick in into another marcher's foot or leg!



- (3) Hiking Socks: An absolute must. We recommend the heavier versions that are a blend of merino wool, spandex and nylon.



- (4) Light Back Pack: Small fanny packs are OK, but if you want to carry an extra pair of socks, candy bars, the issued rain poncho, a camera, extra film/batteries, cell phone, etc., you'll need a light back pack. USMA will issue you belt clips for carrying the issued water bottles, but those aren't very reliable – experienced marchback participants usually carry their water in their backpacks or, alternatively in an insulated waist belt water carrier.

Note: This was adapted from a memo prepared by Wayne Nicoll '57